To Specialize or Not to Specialize: Perspectives from Parents and Coaches

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Approximately 60 million children between the ages of 6 and 18 participate in some type of organized athletics (Jones, Bocarro, & Edwards, 2018; Popkin, Bayomy, & Ahmad, 2019). Over time, the management and delivery of youth sport has evolved into more privatized, adult-driven, and increasingly commercialized sport systems (Jones et al., 2018). As a result, focus has shifted toward competition and athletic success, and more youth athletes are guided toward specializing in a single sport, also known as early sport specialization (ESS; Coakley, 2010; Popkin et al., 2019). ESS is defined as participation in intensive organized sports training and/or competition for greater than eight months per year at the exclusion of other sports, for children 12 years of age or younger (LaPrade et al., 2016). However, ESS is not the only trajectory for elite sport attainment. The developmental model of sport participation (DMSP; Côté, Baker & Abernathy, 2007) describes ESS and early sport sampling (i.e., diversification) as two potential pathways for elite athletic development. Diversification reflects participation in a variety of sports and activities until approximately 12 years old, through which a young athlete develops multilateral physical, social, and psychological skills (Côté, 1999).

To date, scholarship has largely focused on studying ESS from the perspective of youth athletes, placing significant focus on burnout, overuse injuries, and skill development (Baker et al., 2009). To extend the body of knowledge pertaining to youth sport participation, the current study will explore ESS and diversification pathways from an interpersonal level, focusing on parents and coaches. The purpose of this study is to first assess how parents and coaches of youth athletes perceive ESS versus diversification and their associated outcomes, and what factors influence these perceptions. Second, the study aims to determine how parents and coaches’ attitudes and subjective norms impact their intention to influence an athlete’s sport participation.

A phenomenological qualitative approach will be adopted to explore the essence of how and why parents and coaches influence early specialization or diversification. In the first phase of the study, semi-structured interviews lasting approximately 30-45 minutes will be conducted with 10 interscholastic middle school coaches and 10 club coaches associated with Under (U)10, U11, or U12 teams. Softball, baseball, girls’ and boys’ basketball or girls’ and boys’ soccer will be targeted as these sports are prone to specialization (Martin et al., 2017; The Aspen Institute, 2018). In the second phase, interviews will be conducted with parents of specialized and diversified athletes. Interviews will be transcribed verbatim and analyzed through thematic analysis. From the data collected, comparisons can be made within and across several groups (e.g., parents and coaches, interscholastic and club) to identify how different stakeholders in youth sport are informed about ESS and diversification. As the debate over early specialization or diversification continues in youth athletics, results from this study will focus on aligning research studies, educational resources, and stakeholder knowledge to more effectively translate research into practice for athletes, parents, and coaches.